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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 FREETOWN 000511

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SUBJECT: UNPP ELECTS US COLLEGE PROFESSOR AS PRESIDENTIAL  
CANDIDATE - LEGITIMACY CHALLENGED

11. Summary: On June 16 and 17, the United National People's Party (UNPP) held a national convention in Freetown to elect a new party leader and presidential candidate. Delegates elected Abdul Karim Koroma, a U.S. professor, as presidential candidate. One party official denied the legitimacy of the convention in a press release, but the convention attracted approximately 500 attendees and delegates. In a letter to the National Electoral Commission, former UNPP party leader John Karefa-Smart stated that he has resigned his position; however, the legitimacy of this weekend's convention remains in dispute. While the UNPP is no longer a force to be reckoned with in Sierra Leone politics, the party dynamics closely reflect the recent infighting of the two major parties. If the UNPP is able to gain a following, they may form a coalition with a more popular party. If Charles Margai's People's Movement for Democratic Change (PMDC) effectively pulls votes away from the ruling Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP), this will be a dynamic worth watching.  
End Summary.

12. On June 16-17, POL intern attended the 4th Delegates Convention for the UNPP. The convention was held in Freetown to elect a new party leader and presidential candidate. Amidst controversy over the legitimacy of the convention, delegates elected Abdul Karim Koroma as the presidential candidate for the 2007 elections.

13. On June 15, "Standard Times" published a press release claiming that the proposed convention was illegitimate. The press release stated that a very old Dr. John Karefa-Smart, who lives in the USA, was the true party leader and had not abdicated his position to Acting Chairman Ahmed Taylor-Kamara. The press release discouraged party supporters from attending the convention and stated that the official convention will be held in September 2006. The author, David Ansu-Koroma, claims to be the Acting National Executive Secretary of the party.

14. Approximately 300 people attended the first day of the convention. Acting party chairman Ahmed Taylor-Kamara appealed to the international community to closely monitor the 2007 elections, citing campaigning violations already committed by the ruling SLPP. (Note: The SLPP holds a 74% majority in Parliament as well as the presidency. End Note.) Working committee chairman O.B. Conteh stated that the party's poor showing in recent local elections was a result of poor organization and discouragement from past failures. Conteh urged delegates to remain committed to the growth of the party and improvement of the country. Both Taylor-Kamara and Conteh emphasized the unity of the party and tried to dispel any claims that the party was divided or that the convention was illegitimate.

¶5. International delegations from the U.S., UK, Canada and Germany were scheduled to speak; however, only the UK delegate (also a contender for party leader) was present. Delegations from the Eastern, Western, Northern and Southern regions of Sierra Leone were also present. Delegates from the Eastern and Northern regions called for immediate action to build party support, but Taylor-Kamara intervened and emphasized that campaigning would not begin until the National Electoral Commission (NEC) announces election season.

¶6. On June 17, the convention reconvened to elect the new party leader and 2007 presidential candidate. There were approximately 500 people in attendance with 411 voting delegates. Delegates nominated Mohamed Ben Kamara, a businessman living in the UK, and Abdul Karim Koroma, a U.S. college professor. It was clear that Koroma had the overwhelming majority of party support. Though he was not present on the first day of the convention, he was received with cheers and applause on the second day. (Comment: It appears that Koroma gained support by making numerous financial contributions to the party. His election speech was essentially a retelling of these contributions. End Comment.)

¶7. The election was made by open ballot with members of the press counting the votes. The acting chairman made several references to the party constitution to resolve disputes over procedure.

¶8. On June 19, "For Di People" published a letter from former party leader and presidential candidate John Karefa-Smart. The letter confirmed his resignation as party

FREETOWN 00000511 002 OF 002

leader, but was unclear about the legitimacy of the convention. Karefa-Smart appealed to the NEC to disregard any claims from persons not properly empowered by the party constitution to convene a national convention. Karefa-Smart also wrote that Haja Memunatu Conteh, his presidential running mate from the 2002 elections, should serve as interim National Party Leader until a new party leader is elected. Neither Karefa-Smart nor Conteh was present at the convention.

¶9. On June 20, "Awareness Times" published an interview with Karefa-Smart and Haja Memunatu Conteh. Both Karefa-Smart and Conteh declared last weekend's convention to be fraudulent and illegitimate. Conteh stated that the convention was held without regard for proper procedure, as outlined in the party constitution, and that convention organizers excluded many prominent party members, including Conteh herself. (Note: Haja Memunatu Conteh is Chairwoman of the Western Region.) Conteh also stated that while nominee Mohammed Ben Kamara holds an official position as chairman for the UK branch, Abdul Karim Koroma is an ordinary party supporter living in the United States with no official position. UNPP officials are preparing to take legal action against the organizers of the convention.

¶10. Comment: John Karefa-Smart, now a professor at Loma Linda University School of Public Health in California, was Sierra Leone's first Foreign Minister in 1961 and nearly beat out President Kabbah in the 1996 presidential elections. Since his departure, the UNPP has not been a serious political force and currently holds no seats in Parliament. Karefa-Smart was the saving grace of the UNPP. He received widespread support during the 1996 elections and Sierra Leoneans still hold him in high regard. Though he was referenced frequently during the convention (his name even mentioned in the party song), his absence makes a stronger statement. Without another charismatic figure to replace Karefa-Smart it is unlikely that the UNPP will garner substantial political support. Karefa-Smart's official resignation from his position, and the impending legal

battle, will likely seal the UNPP's fate as a minor sideshow party. The controversy over the delegates' convention seems to be par for the course for Sierra Leone politics; with internal party disputes leading to party splits and legal battles ruling the day. If the UNPP is able to gain a following, they may form a coalition with one of the major parties. If Charles Margai's SLPP breakaway party, the PMDC, is able to pull enough votes away from the ruling SLPP, this will be a dynamic worth watching. End Comment.  
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